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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 001567

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/PD, NEA/ARP  
INFO NSC FOR ABRAMS, DOD/OSD FOR SCHENKER AND MATHENY  
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE  
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)

SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA INTERNATIONAL: THE HASSAN AND JOSH SHOW

Ref: Doha 1264

1. (SBU) Summary: Pol/Econ chief participated September 2 in the filming of an Al Jazeera International pilot program not intended for broadcast. The program, co-hosted by two personalities prominent in the 2004 documentary 'Control Room', still lacks polish. AJI operations are still in a somewhat chaotic embryonic stage, with much reliance on current Al Jazeera resources. End summary.

Background

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2. (U) Al Jazeera International (AJI - see reftel) producer Caroline Anstey approached post in late August with a request for ambassadorial participation in the pilot of a talk show planned for the launch of AJI (reportedly scheduled for late 2005/early 2006). Entitled 'The Hassan and Josh Show', the pilot program is co-hosted by Josh Rushing and Hassan Ibrahim, two personalities who played prominent roles in the 2004 documentary 'Control Room' produced by Egyptian-American director Jehane Noujaim. The controversial documentary focused on the Al Jazeera TV channel's Doha-based coverage of events during the 2003 U.S. military action in Iraq.

3. (U) U.S. citizen Josh Rushing was a CENTCOM-based U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant assigned to escort the documentary crew, and Hassan Ibrahim, a UK citizen of Sudanese origin who has been employed by Al Jazeera since its founding in 1996, was an editor at the Al Jazeera Doha studios. Rushing's unexpectedly extensive commentary in the documentary on events related to the U.S. military action in Iraq was reportedly not well viewed by his chain of command and he subsequently resigned from the Marine Corps. He and Hassan, who developed a friendship as a result of their interaction during the documentary, are now both employees of Al Jazeera International.

4. (SBU) The pilot program filmed with Embassy participation in Doha on September 2 is reportedly one of several pilots for the same show, including one filmed in Washington last summer with the participation of NEA/PD Alberto Fernandez. The pilots are not intended for broadcast. Their purpose, according to producers, is to 'try out' the format of the proposed new program. Producers intend to have Josh in Washington and Hassan in Doha, linked by satellite, with one guest per show. Producers hope that the two hosts, interacting with their guest from different cultural and philosophical perspectives, will create an unusual dynamic for the program.

5. (SBU) While post did not consider the 'guinea-pig' pilot program appropriate for the Ambassador, we did want to establish a link to the new channel and offered Pol/Econ Chief Rob Pyott as a substitute. The offer was eagerly accepted, and filming took place on September 2 at the Al Jazeera studios in Doha. Josh flew to Doha from Washington for the event.

The show: needs work

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6. (SBU) Hassan and Josh are clearly still amateur anchors and will need considerable practice to present a more professional and engaging program. It was agreed that the program would deal with U.S. support for reform in the region, with focus on MEPI. Rob made commendable efforts to keep the dialogue on track and answered all questions appropriately. However, Hassan brought up issues such as Iraq, elections in Egypt and the Arab-Israeli conflict in a haphazard manner, preventing any kind of meaningful analysis or sustained exchange. He has both strong Arab nationalist feelings and a strong personality. This combination undermined the intended structure of the show and marginalized Josh's role.

7. (SBU) Although the resulting program lacked quality, the atmosphere before, during and after the filming was cordial. The AJI staff as yet have no facilities of their own (their studios are under construction here in Doha) and are

`camping' at Al Jazeera Arabic's facilities. The two producers we worked with were UK citizen Caroline Anstey, a documentary maker who says she has made documentaries for the BBC and National Geographic among others; and Robb Wood, an American citizen based in Washington. Anstey has relocated to Doha with her husband, who is also employed by AJI. Both Anstey and Wood appeared to be young, ambitious professionals.

#### Beheadings and tapes: key issues

18. (SBU) At an 8/29 familiarization meeting with Emboffs prior to the filming, both Josh and Hassan talked about the criticism they habitually face, as employees of Al Jazeera International, from non-Arab interlocutors. They said such criticism usually focuses on two questions. One is whether Al Jazeera has ever shown beheadings. (Both men strongly denied that that the channel has ever done such a thing, asserting it has always stopped tapes prior to the actual moment of execution). The other issue is Al Jazeera's mysterious access to Al Qaeda tapes. Hassan insisted that the tapes reach Al Jazeera through anonymous sources. Prior to September 11, 2001, the tapes were sent through the mail or via DHL, he said. Now he thinks they are sent via a zipped file which is downloaded in some unknown location (he speculated Morocco) and subsequently passed to Al Jazeera. He did not elaborate on the mechanism used in this last stage.

#### Comment

18. (SBU) The purpose of Embassy participation in the pilot was to show some initial openness to AJI and to get to know some of the personalities involved. Having achieved these objectives, we will continue to observe and report on AJI's birth.

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